

# PRELIMINARY DRAFT REPORT

CITIZEN ADVISORY PANEL ON COUNCIL ELECTIONS

Preliminary Report

*Revised Discussion Draft: June 16, 2003*

**Note: This is a preliminary draft report for discussion purposes only. This document is being made available for public comment, which will be taken at two public hearings. The Citizen's panel has identified and examined the following alternatives as the starting point for their deliberations. This document is NOT yet completed, and the comment that the Panel receives at public hearings will inform the final conclusions of this panel.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

On August 12, 2002, the Seattle City Council adopted Resolution 30509, establishing “*an advisory panel to evaluate options for electing City Councilmembers, to inform the public on such options, and to assist the City Council in reviewing possible amendments to the City Charter election provisions for City Council for possible inclusion on the 2003 ballot.*”

The resulting 18-member Citizen Advisory Panel was charged with: (a) assisting the Seattle City Council by reviewing the various options for electing City Councilmembers; and (b) appraising the public of the pros and cons associated with the various systems. More specifically, the panel was charged with considering “an array of electoral models in its consideration of options, including the current at-large system, geographic, proportional, a blended system or other systems of representation.” The panel was also asked to “be mindful of striking a balance between geographic accountability and creating an elected body that is able to balance neighborhood needs with a citywide and regional perspective.”

The panel met \_\_\_\_ times between March 13, 2003, and \_\_\_\_\_, 2003. While the limited time frame for deliberations did not allow for an exhaustive empirical analysis, the panel was able to organize a thoughtful and thorough approach to fulfilling its charge. The panel received presentations from several speakers that informed the panel’s discussions (see Appendix 1 for a list of presenters). Walt Crowley, Executive Director of History Link, a Washington nonprofit, spoke at length about Seattle’s rich electoral history and answered Panel Member questions regarding the same. Professor Olson of the University of Washington and Professor Donovan of Western Washington University discussed the pros and cons of the various electoral systems and answered panel members questions regarding the experience of specific cities. (See Appendix 3) Mr. Finkelstein, Executive Director of the

Association of Washington Cities, presented the panel with comparative data on the other cities and systems within Washington State. (See Appendix 4). Appendix 5 includes an outline of the choice voting presentation given by one of the panel members. A good description of proportional representation in Cambridge, Massachusetts is included in Appendix 6. Lastly, a survey and synopsis of current studies regarding elections is presented in Appendix 7 and a paper by Charles T. Koon, an undergraduate student at the University of Washington, on the history of civic governance in Seattle is included in Appendix 8.

Panel members discussed criteria to be used in evaluating options, heard from various experts and advocates, and participated in a simulated election using three different election methods: choice voting, a proportional method; cumulative voting, a semi proportional method; and the more traditional winner-take-all plurality voting format. With this ballot it was also possible to determine the outcome of an instant runoff election.

The panel also considered community concerns about City Councilmember “access and responsiveness” and discussed how these concerns may also contribute to some community desires for system change. Petitions have been circulated that propose electing City Councilmembers by district and through proportional representation, which purport to “improve” the means by which the City Council is elected.

Whether or not either of these measures ultimately appears on a ballot, the panel respectfully encourages the City Council to consider the sources of these movements and their perceived dissatisfaction in order to explore potential remedies and enhance whatever system is in place.

Finally, two public hearings were held on June 23<sup>rd</sup> at the Municipal Building and June 30<sup>th</sup> at New Holly Community Center. The purpose of the hearings was to invite public comment on a draft report that the panel produced that identified six election systems and the pros and cons of each. A summary of the hearing is included in Appendix 7.

## **BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Since Seattle's founding, Seattleites have struggled with the politically charged search for the "best" form of city government and city council elections. Incorporated in 1865, Seattle's first city charter was revoked and then rewritten by Olympia in 1869. Under the imposed system, a seven-member City Council was elected at-large until 1873. From 1873 to 1910, the Councilmembers were elected by a ward/(district) system that was used to elect a City Council ranging in size from seven to nine members.

In 1910, the voters of Seattle approved an amendment to the city charter changing the size and nature of the City Council to a nine member, nonpartisan body elected at large. The change was supported by progressive Republicans, labor organizations, and business groups, but opposed by the incumbent politicians. The Seattle Post Intelligencer and the Seattle Star backed the reform, while the Seattle Times opposed it, arguing that the change would increase the power of special interest groups. Subsequent changes initiated by citizens and the state have continued to shape Seattle's government and the dynamics of city hall:

- 1925 City manager system proposed and defeated
- 1926 City manager system rejected again
- 1927 Proposal to restore districts rejected

1946 New City Charter approved establishing a nonpartisan City Council with nine members and an elected nonpartisan Mayor in what was characterized as a “strong council-weak mayor system.

1966 State law gives the Mayor new authority over preparation and administration of the city budget, tipping the power balance in favor of the chief executive.

1975 Proposal to elect some council members by district rejected.

## CRITERIA FOR REVIEWING OPTIONS

In addressing the pros and cons of the various election systems, the Citizen Advisory Panel considered a number of criteria, including but not limited to the following:

- Does the system promote broad representation?
- Does the system promote accountability of Councilmembers?
- Does the system promote quality candidates?
- Does the system promote quality government?
- Does the system allow for addressing diverse issues?
- Does the system lower election costs?
- Does the system promote quality campaigning?
- Does the system promote voter participation?
- Does the system promote Councilmember responsiveness?
- Does the system promote Councilmember accessibility?

The panel members are split in its expectations of a voting system. Some members believe the most important measure of a good voting system is how well it mirrors the preferences of the electorate - a group that makes up 30 percent of the electorate should be able to elect

about 30 percent of the “representative” body. Other members believe that the best election system produces “good governance.” Good governance is defined by these members in a variety of ways: produces a strong council, produces good results for citizens, and promotes honest government.

### **POTENTIAL COUNCIL ELECTION OPTIONS**

Of the ten largest cities in Washington State, excluding Seattle, four elected Councilmembers by districts (Spokane, Everett, Kent, and Bellingham) and six their Councilmembers at-large (Spokane, Tacoma, Yakima, and Bellingham elect by district).

Guest speakers cautioned the panel against crediting the election methods used with the strength or weakness of the resulting government. Much of how well or poorly a governmental unit operates depends on the individuals involved rather than the method used to elect them. For the most part, the pros and cons of the various options are subjective and difficult to prove. Those listed below were offered by one or more panel members and are not necessarily agreed to by the full panel. However, in general it was agreed that these “pros” and “cons” would appear in any debate around the options. As noted earlier, while the panel’s work was thorough and thoughtful, it became clear that substantial conflicting evidence could be mobilized to support or refute the alleged benefit of any particular election option. The panel considered the following options: At-large/position (status quo); At-large/no positions; At-Large Choice Proportional; Geographic Districts; Mixed/Districts/At Large; and Mixed/Districts/Choice.

### **At-large/position (status quo)**

At-large/position voting systems are characterized by the entire electorate voting for candidates who run by separate numbered positions. Thus, in a city with 400,000 eligible voters and nine Council positions, the entire pool of 400,000 voters could cast a vote for each of the nine positions.

#### **Pros**

- Provides elected officials with a geographically broader perspective, allowing citywide interests and regional goals to be considered.
- May mute the affects of parochial interests influencing elected officials.
- Residents from all parts of Seattle who want access to a councilmember can choose from nine councilmembers whose election they can directly influence.
- Citywide campaigns offer an excellent education for service as a Councilmember.
- Seattle's historical experience has shown that at-large election systems can result in greater efficiency and less corruption.
- May provide the largest pool from which to select candidates.
- Provides a stronger balance to Executive power.
- Seattle voters have historic experience with this system, and they understand how it works.
- Seattle's history has shown at-large elections can be conducive to election of minorities.

## **Cons**

- May result in elected officials who pay less attention to, and have less familiarity with some neighborhood concerns.
- May unduly enhance the influence of downtown business interests and other special interests.
- May contribute to the higher cost of elections.
- May give increased power to Mayor.
- May reduce the accountability of elected officials by broadening the constituency served.
- As a winner take all system, may result in less representation of minority groups (e.g., racial and ethnic groups, women, sexual minorities, economic, political, etc.)

## **At-large/no positions (top X vote getters elected to X open seats)**

At-large citywide systems allow an unlimited field of candidates to run for a fixed number of seats. If citizens are allowed to cast one vote per seat and the top vote getters win each seat, the political majority will likely win most of the seats. An alternative method provides citizens with only one vote for the whole slate. In this case the winners will represent a broader political spectrum, but the majority perspective may be disproportionately low.

## **Pros**

- Provides elected officials with a geographically broader perspective, allowing citywide interests and regional goals to be considered.
- May mute the effects of parochial interests influencing elected officials.



- Seattle's historical experience has shown that at-large election systems can result in greater efficiency and less corruption.
- Offers more choices to voters since all candidates are running against each other as well as newcomers. Candidates do not select specific opponents.
- If properly organized and funded, may allow for election of certain minority groups.

### **Cons**

- May result in candidates who pay less attention to, and have less familiarity with, neighborhood concerns.
- May contribute to the higher cost of elections.
- May lower the likelihood of electing local, less affluent or recognized candidates.
- May reduce the accountability of elected officials by broadening the constituency served.
- May result in less representation of minority groups (e.g., racial and ethnic groups, women, sexual minorities, economic, political, etc.) depending upon how many votes are allotted to each voter.
- This may lock-in incumbents since name association may have higher value.
- May result in the voting majority being underrepresented.

### **At-Large/Choice/Proportional**

The rationale underpinning all proportional voting systems is that the representative elected body should mirror the make up of the electorate as closely as possible. A group of like-minded voters who make up about 30 percent of the electorate should have the ability to elect about 30 percent of the seats. There are several different election systems that will enable

such proportional results. The panel devoted its attention to the system currently being promoted by a charter amendment petition. It is known by several different names: Choice Voting, Preference Voting, and Single Transferable Vote.

With this voting method, the electors rank their preferred candidate as their first choice. They may then go on to rank additional preferences (2nd, 3<sup>rd</sup>, etc.). The voter will have only one vote that counts towards election, but if their first choice has insufficient support to win a seat, their vote will be transferred to their next choice if they have listed one. The result is that most voters will be able to elect one of their preferences and fewer votes are “wasted”. If nine seats are to be elected, a little less than one ninth of the votes will be required to fill a seat.

Under this electoral system only one election takes place and there is no primary, although there may be a series of vote counts to determine who wins the election.

### **Pros**

- May be most representative as an electoral model. Most voters will have the ability to elect someone who is one of their choices.
- Unlike winner take all elections that require over 50 percent of the vote to win. Choice Voting enables a winner to be elected with only 10-20 percent of the vote.
- May be deemed more “democratic” than most others by allowing broader diversity of perspectives to be elected.

- Could reduce election costs for both the candidates and administrators because a primary election is not required with this system; the elimination process can take place on one ballot.
- May encourage groups to participate that traditionally have felt their views have not been represented.
- Campaigns may be more likely to focus on policy issues.
- Seattle could be the first city in the state to adopt such an innovative voting system, thereby setting an exciting example for others.
- This system allows neighborhoods to elect a representative if such representation is of prime importance to their voters.
- Some groups may construct “slates” of candidates that would be apt to represent a broad minority electorate in order to assure their list has the widest possible appeal.
- Similar systems have been used elsewhere in the U.S.
- May not require a change in state law because Seattle is a home rule charter city.

## **Cons**

- May be difficult for voters to understand the vote transfer process.
- Proportional representation is alien to most Americans and its adoption would require a significant educational component.
- Would require new software for King County voting equipment - a one-time new expense.
- May require a change in state law.
- In a crowded field, those with less financing may be at a disadvantage.

- Under this system slates of candidates could be used to undermine a non-partisan system.

### **Geographic Districts**

The system of elections divides a city into geographic districts that are more or less of equivalent size relative to population. Rather than running citywide, as Councilmembers do in an at-large system, they are elected by the voters within a district. This is a winner take all system in which one voter will have one vote to cast for a candidate. The political majority or plurality in each district will name the winner.

#### **Pros**

- Better representation for some groups than in at-large systems because the potential pool of constituents is smaller.
- May result in less costly campaigns for some candidates due to the small geographic area to be covered.
- Increases Council's ability to check and balance the Mayor.
- May allow elected officials to be more responsive to their constituents.
- Simple for voters to understand and administer.
- Depending on housing patterns, may result in greater representation of ethnic and racial minorities and women.

## **Cons**

- May lead to a focus on smaller parochial issues, at the expense of broad, regional issues.
- May increase the influence of moneyed special interests.
- Like all winner take all systems, over-represents those who vote for the winner and under-represents those who vote for the loser.
- Requires that districts be drawn.
- May allow well-funded groups to more easily target candidates they wish to defeat.
- Raises issues of gerrymandering.
- Seattle does not divide into nine “natural neighborhoods” of equal population.
- Reduces Council’s ability to check and balance the Mayor.
- Constituencies are not all defined geographically and constituencies that are not defined geographically may not be served.
- Electing Councilmembers by district could result in Councilmembers becoming mini-mayors for their district.
- Voters can influence the election of only one Councilmember.
- May eliminate highly qualified candidates when more than one lives in the same district.

### **Mixed/Districts/At-Large**

This is a winner take all electoral system that allows for some number of elected representatives to be elected by all of the eligible voters in a jurisdiction and others to be elected by districts. Blended systems have all of the strengths and weaknesses of at-large and district systems, but are presumed, by blending the two systems, to create a unique electoral model, which maximizes the strengths of both systems while neutralizing the inherent weaknesses of both.

#### **Pros**

- Both universal and parochial interests are represented, allowing citywide interests and regional goals to be advanced as well as neighborhood interests.
- Some campaigns may be less costly.
- May affect a balance between the influence of moneyed special interests and neighborhood interests.
- May provide for greater representation of minority voters (e.g., racial and ethnic groups, women, sexual minorities, economic, political, etc.)

#### **Cons**

- May confuse voters.
- May create two classes of elected officials - at-large and district based representatives. Some may be looked upon as more important than others.
- District elected officials may focus on parochial issues.

- The system remains a winner take all system, and consequently may over-represent those who vote for the winner and under-represent those who vote for the loser.
- There are monetary costs associated with defining districts and there is the risk of gerrymandering.
- Because it is possible for an at-large Councilmember and a district Councilmember to be elected from the same neighborhood, some neighborhoods could have “double” representation, and may enjoy a disproportionate amount of power relative to other parts of the city.

### **Mixed/Districts/Choice**

A compromise between a proportional system and a winner take all district system might work as follows: in one year voters elect four city Councilmembers, one from roughly each quadrant of the city. Two years later they elect the five Councilmembers at-large using a choice voting proportional system. Such a combined system would theoretically give each voter six Councilmembers they could look upon as “theirs” (their own district plus the 5 at large). The proportional election would enable minority representation for any group that could gather together roughly 17 percent of the vote. Such a compromise might at least partially satisfy both groups that are advocating a change from our current system.

In a mixed system with some district, some at large, candidates could run under a proportional representation/choice system.

### **Pros**

- May increase the opportunity for representation of citywide, neighborhood, and dispersed minority interests.

- May result in less costly campaigns. Winning a district seat would require roughly 51 percent of the vote (that would be about 13 percent of the total vote). The proportional seats would require about 17 percent of the vote, but would be collected citywide.
- May enhance Councilmember accountability as each voter will have multiple ways to be represented, and thus have multiple Councilmembers who feel a need to listen to them.
- May create a disincentive against mudslinging when ranked ballots are used.
- Would reduce the likelihood of gerrymandering, compared to a district system, since it would only be useful to a minority of Councilmembers.
- A mixed system using choice voting may be more stable given the American history of swinging back and forth between districts and at-large winner take all elections.
- May contribute to lower election costs because the Mayor and City Attorney, as well as district winners, could be elected using the same ballot style, for example the voting results could be tallied using instant runoff voting principles . This could make possible the elimination of the cost of Seattle primary election and related expenses.

## **Cons**

- The alternating form of elections may confuse many voters.
- Voters may be initially distrustful of the process for counting ranked ballots.
- There are additional costs for the district-drawing process and the software upgrade to count ranked ballots, potentially making this system the most expensive to administer. These increased costs may be somewhat offset by eliminating the need for a primary election.



- May create two classes of Councilmembers who are perceived differently.
- Because it is possible for an at-large Councilmember and a district Councilmember to be elected from the same neighborhood, some neighborhoods will have “double” representation, and may enjoy a disproportionate amount of power relative to other parts of the city.

## **PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL**

*To be completed after public hearings.*

### **Chronological List of Presenters**

The Panel heard from the following guest presenters (listed in chronological order of presentation) who were scheduled based on calendar availability:

Charles T. Koon,  
Undergraduate Student, University of Washington  
Jay Saucedo and Jeanne Legault  
Seattle Districts Now Initiative

Walt Crowley  
HistoryLink

George Griffin  
Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce

David Olson  
University of Washington

Todd Donovan  
Western Washington University

Stan Finkelstein  
Association of Washington Cities